



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

BJ
1477
K45

MY KEY OF LIFE



MY KEY OF LIFE



MY KEY OF LIFE





Helen Keller.

MY KEY OF LIFE







Helen Keller.

MY KEY OF LIFE
OPTIMISM : AN ESSAY
BY HELEN KELLER
AUTHOR OF "THE STORY OF MY LIFE"

THE LITTLE PAPER COMPANY
1375 TAYSTON PLACE, BIRMINGHAM



Helen Keller.

MY KEY OF LIFE
OPTIMISM : AN ESSAY
BY HELEN KELLER 
AUTHOR OF "THE ~~STORY~~ OF MY LIFE"

LONDON : ISBISTER & COMPANY
15 & 16 TAVISTOCK ST. COVENT GARDEN

1904

BJ 1477

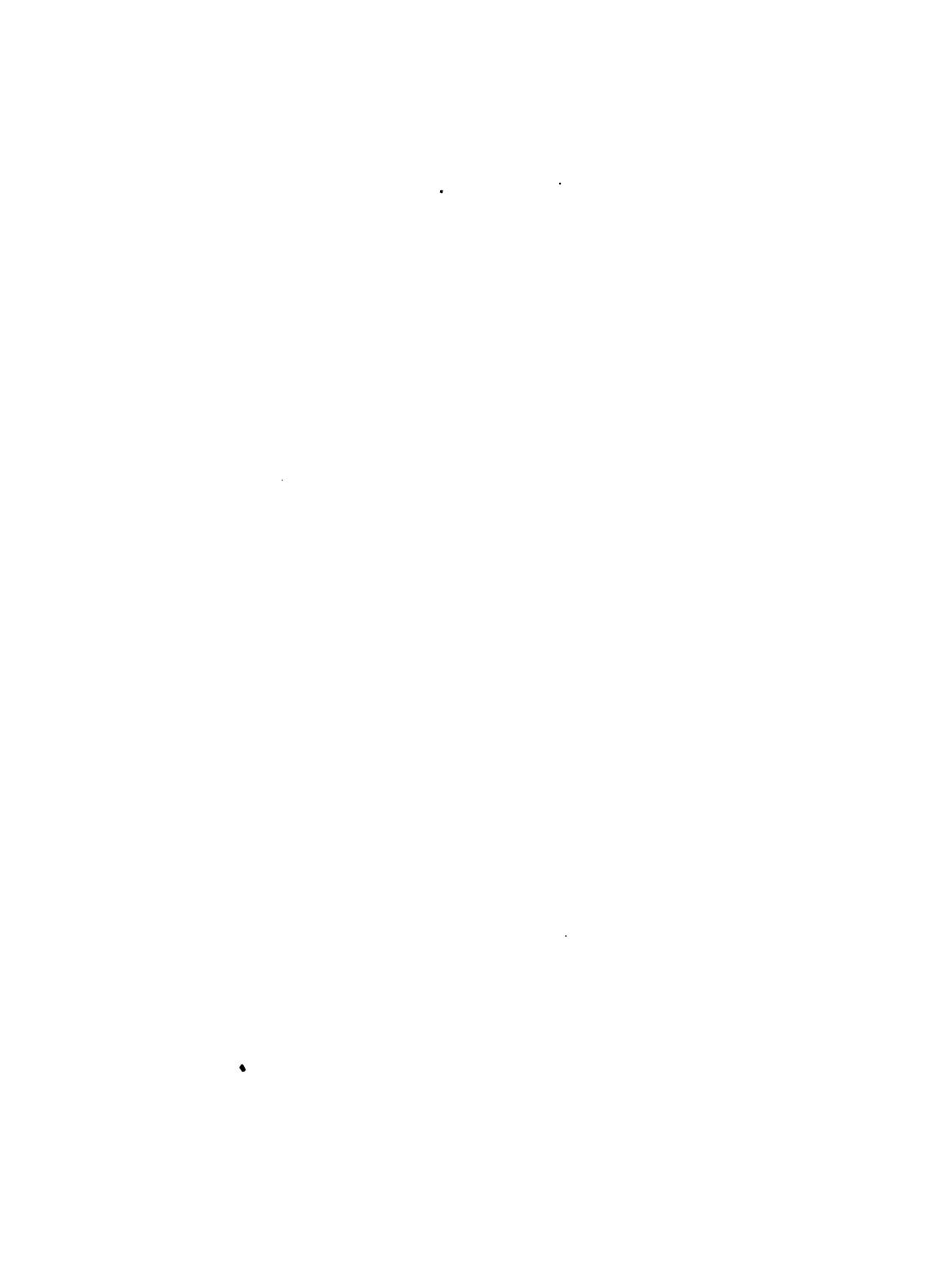
K 45

TO MY TEACHER

b

CONTENTS

	PAGE
PART I	
OPTIMISM WITHIN	1
PART II	
OPTIMISM WITHOUT	13
PART III	
THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM	37



PART I

OPTIMISM WITHIN

COULD we choose our environment, and were desire in human undertakings synonymous with endowment, all men would, I suppose, be optimists. Certainly most of us regard happiness as the proper end of all earthly enterprise. The will to be happy animates alike the philosopher, the prince, and the chimney-sweep. No matter how dull, or how mean, or how wise a man is, he feels that happiness is his indisputable right.

It is curious to observe what

OPTIMISM WITHIN

different ideals of happiness people cherish, and in what singular places they look for this well-spring of their life. Many look for it in the hoarding of riches, some in the pride of power, and others in the achievements of art and literature ; a few seek it in the exploration of their own minds, or in the search for knowledge.

Most people measure their happiness in terms of physical pleasure and material possession. Could they win some visible goal which they have set on the horizon, how happy they would be. Lacking this gift or that circumstance, they would be miserable. If happiness is to be so measured, I who cannot hear or see have every reason to sit in a corner with folded hands, and weep. If I am happy in spite of my deprivations, if my happiness is so deep that it is a faith, so thoughtful that it becomes a philosophy of life,—

OPTIMISM WITHIN

if, in short, I am an optimist, my testimony to the creed of optimism is worth hearing. As sinners stand up in a meeting and testify to the goodness of God, so one who is called afflicted may rise up in gladness of conviction, and testify to the goodness of life.

Once I knew the depth where no hope was, and darkness lay on the face of all things. Then love came and set my soul free. Once I knew only darkness and stillness. Now I know hope and joy. Once I fretted and beat myself against the wall that shut me in. Now I rejoice in the consciousness that I can think, act, and attain heaven. My life was without past or future ; death, the pessimist would say, " a consummation devoutly to be wished." But a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness, and

OPTIMISM WITHIN

my heart leaped to the rapture of living. Night fled before the day of thought, and love and joy and hope came up in a passion of obedience to knowledge. Can any one who has escaped such captivity, who has felt the thrill and glory of freedom, be a pessimist?

My early experience was thus a leap from bad to good. If I tried, I could not check the momentum of my first leap out of the dark; to move breast forward is a habit learned suddenly at that first moment of release and rush into the light. With the first word I used intelligently, I learned to live, to think, to hope. Darkness cannot shut me in again. I have had a glimpse of the shore, and can now live by the hope of reaching it.

So my optimism is no mild and unreasoning satisfaction. A poet once said I must be happy because I did

OPTIMISM WITHIN

not see the bare, cold present, but lived in a beautiful dream. I do live—in a beautiful dream ; but that dream—is the actual, the present—not cold, but warm ; not bare, but furnished with a thousand blessings. The very evil which the poet supposed would be a cruel disillusionment is necessary to the fullest knowledge of joy. Only by contact with evil could I have learned to feel by contrast the beauty of truth and love and goodness.

It is a mistake always to contemplate the good and ignore the evil, because by making people neglectful it lets in disaster. There is a dangerous optimism of ignorance and indifference. It is not enough to say that the twentieth century is the best age in the history of mankind, and to take refuge from the evils of the world in skyey dreams of good. How many good men, prosperous and contented, looked

OPTIMISM WITHIN

around and saw naught but good, while millions of their fellow men were bartered and sold like cattle ! No doubt there were comfortable optimists who thought Wilberforce a meddlesome fanatic when he was working with might and main to free the slaves. I distrust the rash optimism in this country that cries, " Hurrah, we're all right ! This is the greatest nation on earth," when there are grievances that call loudly for redress. That is false optimism. Optimism that does not count the cost is like a house builded on sand. A man must understand evil and be acquainted with sorrow before he can write himself an optimist and expect others to believe that he has reason for the faith that is in him.

I know what evil is. Once or twice I have wrestled with it, and for a time felt its chilling touch on

OPTIMISM WITHIN

my life ; so I speak with knowledge when I say that evil is of no consequence, except as a sort of mental gymnastic. For the very reason that I have come in contact with it, I am more truly an optimist. I can say with conviction that the struggle which evil necessitates is one of the greatest blessings. It makes us strong, patient, helpful men and women. It lets us into the soul of things, and teaches us that although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it. My optimism, then, does not rest on the absence of evil, but on a glad belief in the preponderance of good and a willing effort always to co-operate with the good, that it may prevail. I try to increase the power God has given me to see the best in everything and every one, and make that Best a part of my life. The world is sown with good ;

OPTIMISM WITHIN

but unless I turn my glad thoughts into practical living and till my own field, I cannot reap a kernel of the good.

Thus my optimism is grounded in two worlds, myself and what is about me. I demand that the world be good, and lo, it obeys. I proclaim the world good, and facts range themselves to prove my proclamation overwhelmingly true. To what is good I open the doors of my being, and jealously shut them against what is bad. Such is the force of this beautiful and wilful conviction ; it carries itself in the face of all opposition. I am never discouraged by absence of good. I never can be argued into hopelessness. Doubt and mistrust are the mere panic of timid imagination, which the steadfast heart will conquer, and the large mind transcend.

As my college days draw to a close,

OPTIMISM WITHIN

I find myself looking forward with beating heart and bright anticipations to what the future holds of activity for me. My share in the work of the world may be limited, but the fact that it is work makes it precious. Nay, the desire and will to work is optimism itself.

Two generations ago Carlyle flung forth his gospel of work. To the dreamers of the Revolution, who built cloud-castles of happiness, and, when the inevitable winds rent the castles asunder, turned pessimists—to those ineffectual Endymions, Alastors, and Werthers, this Scots peasant, man of dreams, in the hard practical world, cried aloud his creed of labour. “Be no longer a Chaos, but a World. Produce ! produce ! Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a product, produce it ! in God’s name ! ’Tis the utmost thou hast in thee ;

OPTIMISM WITHIN

out with it, then. Up, up ! whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called to-day ; for the Night cometh wherein no man may work."

Some have said that Carlyle was taking refuge from a hard world by bidding men grind and toil, eyes to the earth, and so forget their misery. This is not Carlyle's thought. "Fool!"

— he cries, "the Ideal is in thyself ; the Impediment is also in thyself. Work out the Ideal in the poor, miserable Actual ; live, think, believe, and be free !" It is plain what he says, that work, production, brings life out of chaos, makes the individual a world, an order; and order is optimism.

I, too, can work, and because I love to labour with my head and my hands, I am an optimist in spite of all. I used to think I should be thwarted in my desire to do something useful.

OPTIMISM WITHIN

But I have found out that though the ways in which I can make myself useful are few, yet the work open to me is endless. The gladdest labourer in the vineyard may be a cripple. Even should the others outstrip him, yet the vineyard ripens in the sun each year, and full clusters weigh into his hand. Darwin could work only half an hour at a time ; yet in many diligent half-hours he laid anew the foundations of philosophy. I long to accomplish a great and noble task ; but it is my chief duty and joy to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. It is my service to think how I can best fulfil the demands that each day makes upon me, and to rejoice that others can do what I cannot. Green the historian* tells us that the world is

* "Life and Letters of John Richard Green."
Edited by Leslie Stephen.

OPTIMISM WITHIN

moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker ; and that thought alone suffices to guide me in this dark world and wide. I love the good that others do ; for their activity is an assurance that whether I can help or not, the true and the good will stand sure.

I trust, and nothing that happens disturbs my trust. I recognise the beneficence of the power which we all worship as supreme—Order, Fate, the Great Spirit, Nature, God. I recognise this power in the sun that makes all things grow and keeps life afoot. I make a friend of this indefinable force, and straightway I feel glad, brave, and ready for any lot Heaven may decree for me. This is my religion of optimism.

PART II

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

OPTIMISM, then, is a fact within my own heart. But as I look out upon life, my heart meets no contradiction. The outward-world justifies my inward universe of good. All through the years I have spent in college, my reading has been a continuous discovery of good. In literature, philosophy, religion, and history, I find the mighty witnesses to my faith.

Philosophy is the history of a deaf-blind person writ large. From the talks of Socrates up through Plato,

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

Berkeley, and Kant, philosophy records the efforts of human intelligence to be free of the clogging material world and to fly forth into a universe of pure idea. A deaf-blind person ought to find special meaning in Plato's Ideal World. These things which you see and hear and touch are not the reality of realities, but imperfect manifestations of the Idea, the Principle, the Spiritual ; the Idea is the truth, the rest is delusion.

If this be so, my brethren who enjoy the fullest use of the senses are not aware of any reality which may not equally well be in reach of my mind. Philosophy gives to the mind the prerogative of seeing truth, and bears us into a realm where I, who am blind, am not different from you who see. When I learned from Berkeley that your eyes receive an inverted image of

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

things which your brain unconsciously corrects, I began to suspect that the eye is not a very reliable instrument after all, and I felt as one who had been restored to equality with others, glad, not because the senses avail them so little,—but because in God's eternal world,—mind and spirit avail so much. It seemed to me that philosophy had been written for my special consolation, whereby I get even with some modern philosophers who apparently think that I was intended as an experimental case for their special instruction! But in a little measure my small voice of individual experience does join in the declaration of philosophy that the good is the only world, and that world is a world of spirit. It is also a universe where order is All, where an unbroken logic holds the parts together, where dis-

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

order defines itself as non-existence, where evil, as St. Augustine held, is delusion, and therefore is not.

The meaning of philosophy to me is not only in its principles, but also in the happy isolation of its great exponents. They were seldom of the world, even when, like Plato and Leibnitz, they moved in its courts and drawing-rooms. To the tumult of life they were deaf, and they were blind to its distraction and perplexing diversities. Sitting alone, but not in darkness, they learned to find everything in themselves, and failing to find it even there, they still trusted in meeting the truth face to face when they should leave the earth behind and become partakers in the wisdom of God. The great mystics lived alone, deaf and blind, but dwelling with God.

I understand how it was possible

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

for Spinoza to find sleep and sustained happiness when he was excommunicated, poor, despised, and suspected alike by Jew and Christian ; not that the kind world of men ever treated me so, but that his isolation from the universe of sensuous joys is somewhat analogous to mine. He loved the good for its own sake. Like many great spirits he accepted his place in the world, and confided himself child-like to a higher power, believing that it worked through his hands and predominated in his being. He trusted implicitly, and that is what I do. Deep, solemn optimism, it seems to me, should spring from this firm belief in the presence of God in the individual ; not a remote, unapproachable governor of the universe, but a God who is very near every one of us, who is present not only in earth, sea, and sky, but also in every pure and

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

— noble impulse of our hearts, “the source and centre of all minds their only point of rest.”

Thus from philosophy I learn that we see only shadows and know only in part, and that all things change ; but the mind, the unconquerable mind, compasses all truth, embraces the universe, as it is, converts the shadows to realities and makes tumultuous changes seem but moments in an eternal silence, or short lines in the infinite theme of perfection, and the evil but “a halt on the way to good.” Though with my hand I grasp only a small part of the universe, with my spirit I see the whole, and in my thought I can compass the beneficent laws by which it is governed. The confidence and trust which these conceptions inspire teach me to rest safe in my life as in a fate, and protect me from spectral doubts and fears.

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

Verily, blessed are ye that have not seen, and yet have believed.

All the world's great philosophers have been lovers of God and believers in man's inner goodness. To know the history of philosophy is to know that the highest thinkers of the ages, the seers of the tribes and the nations, have been optimists.

The growth of philosophy is the story of man's spiritual life. Outside lies that great mass of events which we call history. As I look on this mass I see it take form and shape itself in the ways of God. The history of man is an epic of progress. In the world within and the world without I see a wonderful correspondence, a glorious symbolism which reveals the human and the divine communing together, the lesson of philosophy repeated in fact. In all the parts that compose the history of mankind hides

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

the spirit of good, and gives meaning to the whole.

Far back in the twilight of history I see the savage fleeing from the forces of nature which he has not learned to control, and seeking to propitiate supernatural beings which are but the creation of his superstitious fear. With a shift of imagination I see the savage emancipated, civilised. He no longer worships the grim deities of ignorance. Through suffering he has learned to build a roof over his head, to defend his life and his home, and over his state he has erected a temple in which he worships the joyous gods of light and song. From suffering he has learned justice; from the struggle with his fellows he has learned the distinction between right and wrong which makes him a

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

moral being. He is gifted with the genius of Greece.

But Greece was not perfect. Her poetical and religious ideals were far above her practice ; therefore she died, that her ideals might survive to ennable coming ages.

Rome, too, left the world a rich inheritance. Through the vicissitudes of history her laws and ordered government have stood a majestic object-lesson for the ages. But when the stern, frugal character of her people ceased to be the bone and sinew of her civilisation, Rome fell.

Then came the new nations of the North and founded a more permanent society. The base of Greek and Roman society was the slave, crushed into the condition of the wretches who “laboured, foredone, in the field and at the workshop, like haltered horses, if blind, so much the quieter.” The

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

base of the new society was the freeman who fought, tilled, judged, and grew from more to more. He wrought a state out of tribal kinship and fostered an independence and self-reliance which no oppression could destroy. The story of man's slow ascent from savagery through barbarism and self-mastery to civilisation is the embodiment of the spirit of optimism. From the first hour of the new nations each century has seen a better Europe, until the development of the world demanded America.

Tolstoi said the other day that America, once the hope of the world, was in bondage to Mammon. Tolstoi and other Europeans have still much to learn about this great free country of ours before they understand the unique civic struggle which America is undergoing. She is confronted with the mighty task of assimilating all

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

the foreigners that are drawn together from every country, and welding them into one people with one national spirit. We have the right to demand the forbearance of critics until the United States has demonstrated whether she can make one people out of all the nations of the earth. London economists are alarmed at less than five hundred thousand foreign-born in a population of six millions, and discuss earnestly the danger of too many aliens. But what is their problem in comparison with that of New York, which counts nearly one million five hundred thousand foreigners among its three and a half million citizens? Think of it! Every third person in our American metropolis is an alien. By these figures alone America's greatness can be measured.

It is true, America has devoted her-

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

- self largely to the solution of material problems—breaking the fields, opening mines, irrigating deserts, spanning the continent with railroads ; but she is doing these things in a new way,
- by educating her people, by placing at the service of every man's need every resource of human skill. She is transmuting her industrial wealth into the education of her workmen, so that unskilled people shall have no place in American life, so that all men shall bring mind and soul to the control of matter.

America might do all this and still be selfish, still be a worshipper of Mammon. But America is the home of charity as well as of commerce. In the midst of roaring traffic, side by side with noisy factory and sky-reaching warehouse, one sees the school, the library, the hospital, the park—works of public benevolence

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

which represent wealth wrought into—
ideas that shall endure for ever. Be—
hold what America has already done
to alleviate suffering and restore the
afflicted to society—given sight to
the fingers of the blind, language to
the dumb lip, and mind to the idiot
clay, and tell me if indeed she worships
Mammon only. Who shall measure
the sympathy, skill, and intelligence
with which she ministers to all who
come to her, and lessens the ever—
swelling tide of poverty, misery, and
degradation which every year rolls
against her gates from all the nations?

When I reflect on all these facts, I
cannot but think that, Tolstoi and
other theorists to the contrary, it is
a splendid thing to be an American.
In America the optimist finds abun—
dant reason for confidence in the
present and hope for the future, and
this hope, this confidence, may well

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

extend over all the great nations of the earth.

If we compare our own time with the past, we find in modern statistics a solid foundation for a confident and buoyant world-optimism. Beneath the doubt, the unrest, the materialism, which surround us still glows and burns at the world's best life a steadfast faith. To hear the pessimist, one would think civilisation had bivouacked in the Middle Ages, and had not had marching orders since. He does not realise that the progress of evolution is not an uninterrupted march.

Now touching goal, now backward hurl'd,
Toil the indomitable world.

I have recently read an address by one whose knowledge it would be presumptuous to challenge. In it I find abundant evidence of progress.

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

During the past fifty years crime has decreased. True, the records of to-day contain a longer list of crime. But our statistics are more complete and accurate than the statistics of times past. Besides, there are many offences on the list which half a century ago would not have been thought of as crimes. This shows that the public conscience is more sensitive than it ever was.

Our definition of crime has grown stricter, our punishment of it more lenient and intelligent. The old feeling of revenge has largely disappeared.— It is no longer an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The criminal is treated as one who is diseased. He is confined not merely for punishment, but because he is a menace to society. While he is under restraint, he is treated with humane care and disciplined so that his mind shall be

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

cured of its disease, and he shall be restored to society able to do his part of its work.

Another sign of awakened and enlightened public conscience is the effort to provide the working class with better houses. Did it occur to any one a hundred years ago to think whether the dwellings of the poor were sanitary, convenient, or sunny? Do not forget that in the "good old times" cholera and typhus devastated whole countries, and that pestilence walked abroad in the capitals of Europe.

Not only have our labouring-classes better houses and better places to work in, but employers recognise the right of the employed to seek more than the bare wage of existence. In the darkness and turmoil of our modern industrial strifes we discern but dimly the principles that underlie

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

the struggle. The recognition of the right of all men to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, a spirit of conciliation such as Burke dreamed of, the willingness on the part of the strong to make concessions to the weak, the realisation that the rights of the employer are bound up in the rights of the employed—in these the optimist beholds the signs of our times.

Another right which the State has recognised as belonging to each man is the right to an education. In the enlightened parts of Europe and in America every city, every town, every village, has its school; and it is no longer a class who have access to knowledge, for to the children of the poorest labourer the school-door stands open. From the civilised nations universal education is driving the dull host of illiteracy.

Education broadens to include all

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

men, and deepens to reach all truths. Scholars are no longer confined to Greek, Latin, and mathematics, but they also study science ; and science converts the dreams of the poet, the theory of the mathematician, and the fiction of the economist into ships, hospitals, and instruments that enable one skilled hand to perform the work of a thousand. The student of to-day is not asked if he has learned his grammar. Is he a mere grammar-machine, a dry catalogue of scientific facts, or has he acquired the qualities of manliness ? His supreme lesson is to grapple with great public questions, to keep his mind hospitable to new ideas and new views of truth, to restore the finer ideals that are lost sight of in the struggle for wealth, and to promote justice between man and man. He learns that there may be substitutes for human labour—horse-power

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

and machinery and books ; but “ there are no substitutes for common sense, patience, integrity, courage.”

Who can doubt the vastness of the achievements of education when one considers how different the condition of the blind and the deaf is from what it was a century ago ? They were then objects of superstitious pity, and shared the lowest beggar’s lot. Everybody looked upon their case as hopeless, and this view plunged them deeper in despair. The blind themselves laughed in the face of Haüy when he offered to teach them to read. How pitiable is the cramped sense of imprisonment in circumstances which teaches men to expect no good and to treat any attempt to relieve them as the vagary of a disordered mind ! But now, behold the transformation ; see how institutions and industrial establishments for the blind

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

have sprung up as if by magic ; see how many of the deaf have learned not only to read and write but to speak ; and remember that the faith and patience of Dr. Howe have borne fruit in the efforts that are being made everywhere to educate the deaf-blind and equip them for the struggle. Do you wonder that I am full of hope and lifted up ?

The highest result of education is tolerance. Long ago men fought and died for their faith ; but it took ages to teach them the other kind of courage —the courage to recognise the faiths of their brethren and their rights of conscience. Tolerance is the first principle of community ; it is the spirit which conserves the best that all men think. No loss by flood or lightning, no destruction of cities and temples by the hostile forces of nature, has deprived man of so many noble

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

lives and impulses as those which his intolerance has destroyed.

With wonder and sorrow I go back in thought to the ages of intolerance and bigotry. I see Jesus received with scorn and nailed on the cross. I see His followers hounded and tortured and burned. I am present where the finer spirits that revolt from the superstition of the Middle Ages are accused of impiety and stricken down. I behold the children of Israel reviled and persecuted unto death by those who pretend Christianity with the tongue ; I see them driven from land to land, hunted from refuge to refuge, summoned to the felon's place, exposed to the whip, mocked as they utter amid the pain of martyrdom a confession of the faith which they have kept with such splendid constancy. The same bigotry that oppresses the Jews falls tiger-like upon Christian

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

non-conformists of purest lives, and wipes out the Albigenses and the peaceful Vaudois, "whose bones lie on the mountains cold." I see the clouds part slowly, and I hear a cry of protest against the bigot. The restraining hand of tolerance is laid upon the inquisitor, and the humanist utters a message of peace to the persecuted. Instead of the cry, "Burn the heretics!" men study the human soul with sympathy, and there enters into their hearts a new reverence for that which is unseen.

The idea of brotherhood re-dawns upon the world with a broader significance than the narrow association of members in a sect or creed ; and thinkers of great soul like Lessing challenge the world to say which is more godlike, the hatred and tooth-and-nail grapple of conflicting religions, or sweet accord and mutual

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

helpfulness. Ancient prejudice of man against his brother-man wavers and retreats before the radiance of a more generous sentiment, which will not sacrifice men to forms, or rob them of the comfort and strength they find in their own beliefs. The heresy of one age becomes the orthodoxy of the next. Mere tolerance has given place to a sentiment of brotherhood between sincere men of all denominations.

Thus in my outlook upon our times I find that I am glad to be a citizen of the world, and as I regard my country, I find that to be an American is to be an optimist. I know the unhappy and unrighteous story of what has been done in the Philippines beneath our flag ; but I believe that in the accidents of statecraft the best intelligence of the people sometimes fails to express itself. I read in the

OPTIMISM WITHOUT

history of Julius Cæsar that during the civil wars there were millions of peaceful herdsmen and labourers who worked as long as they could, and fled before the advance of the armies that were led by the few, then waited until the danger was past, and returned to repair damages with patient hands. So the people are patient and honest, while their rulers stumble. I rejoice to see in the world and in this country a new and better patriotism than that which seeks the life of an enemy. It is a patriotism higher than that of the battlefield. It moves thousands to lay down their lives in social service, and every life so laid down brings us a step nearer the time when cornfields shall no more be fields of battle.

PART III

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

THE test of all beliefs is their practical effect in life. If it be true that optimism compels the world forward, and pessimism retards it, then it is dangerous to propagate a pessimistic philosophy. One who believes that the pain in the world outweighs the joy, and expresses that unhappy conviction only adds to the pain. Schopenhauer is an enemy to the race. Even if he earnestly believed that this is the most wretched of possible worlds, he should not promulgate a doctrine which robs

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

men of the incentive to fight with circumstance. If Life gave him ashes for bread, it was his fault. Life is a fair field, and the right will prosper if we stand by our guns.

Let pessimism once take hold of the mind, and life is all topsy-turvy, all vanity and vexation of spirit. There is no cure for individual or social disorder, except in forgetfulness and annihilation. "Let us eat, drink, and be merry," says the pessimist, "for to-morrow we die." If I regarded my life from the point of view of the pessimist, I should be undone. I should seek in vain for the light that does not visit my eyes, and the music that does not ring in my ears. I should beg night and day and never be satisfied. I should sit apart in awful solitude, a prey to fear and despair. But since I consider it a duty to myself and to others to be

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

happy, I escape a misery worse than any physical deprivation.

Who shall dare let his incapacity for hope or goodness cast a shadow upon the courage of those who bear their burdens as if they were privileges ? The optimist cannot fall back, cannot falter ; for he knows his neighbour will be hindered by his failure to keep in line. He will therefore hold his place fearlessly and remember the duty of silence. Sufficient unto each heart is its own sorrow. He will take the iron claws of circumstances in his hand and use them as tools to break away the obstacles that block his path. He will work as if upon him alone depended the establishment of heaven on earth.

We have seen that the world's philosophers—the Sayers of the Word—were optimists ; so also are the men of action and achievement—the Doers

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

of the Word. Dr. Howe found his way to Laura Bridgman's soul because he began with the belief that he could reach it. English jurists had said that the deaf-blind were idiots in the eyes of the law. Behold what the optimist does. He controverts a hard legal axiom ; he looks behind the dull impassive clay and sees a human soul in bondage, and quietly, resolutely sets about its deliverance. His efforts are victorious. He creates intelligence out of idiocy and proves to the law that the deaf-blind man is a responsible being.

When Haüy offered to teach the blind to read, he was met by pessimism that laughed at his folly. Had he not believed that the soul of man is mightier than the ignorance that fetters it, had he not been an optimist, he would not have turned the fingers of the blind into new instruments.

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars, or sailed to an unchartered land, or opened a new heaven to the human spirit. St. Bernard was so deeply an optimist that he believed two hundred and fifty enlightened men could illuminate the darkness which overwhelmed the period of the Crusades; and the light of his faith broke like a new day upon Western Europe. John Bosco, the benefactor of the poor and the friendless of Italian cities, was another optimist, another prophet who, perceiving a Divine idea while it was yet afar, proclaimed it to his countrymen. Although they laughed at his vision and called him a madman, yet he worked on patiently, and with the labour of his hands he maintained a home for little street waifs. In the fervour of enthusiasm he predicted the wonderful movement which should

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

result from his work. Even in the days before he had money or patronage, he drew glowing pictures of the splendid system of schools and hospitals which should spread from one end of Italy to the other, and he lived to see the organisation of the San Salvador Society, which was the embodiment of his prophetic optimism. When Dr. Seguin declared his opinion that the feeble-minded could be taught, again people laughed, and in their complacent wisdom said he was no better than an idiot himself. But the noble optimist persevered, and by-and-by the reluctant pessimists saw that he whom they ridiculed had become one of the world's philanthropists. Thus the optimist believes, attempts, achieves. He stands always in the sunlight. Some day the wonderful, the inexpressible, arrives and shines upon him, and he is there to

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

welcome it. His soul meets his own and beats a glad march to every new discovery, every fresh victory over difficulties, every addition to human knowledge and happiness.

We have found that our great philosophers and our great men of action are optimists. So, too, our most potent men of letters have been optimists in their books and in their lives. No pessimist ever won an audience commensurately wide with his genius, and optimistic writers have been read and admired out of all measure to their talents, simply because they wrote of the sunlit side of life. Dickens, Lamb, Goldsmith, Irving, all the well-beloved and gentle humorists were optimists. Swift, the pessimist, has never had as many readers as his towering genius should command, and indeed, when he comes down into our century and meets Thackeray that generous opti-

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

mist can hardly do him justice. In spite of the latter-day notoriety of the "Rubáiyát" of Omar Khayyám, we may set it down as a rule that he who would be heard must be a believer, must have a fundamental optimism in his philosophy. He may bluster and disagree and lament as Carlyle and Ruskin do sometimes; but a basic confidence in the good destiny of life and of the world must underlie his work.

Shakespeare is the prince of optimists. His tragedies are a revelation of moral order. In *Lear* and *Hamlet* there is a looking forward to something better, some one is left at the end of the play to right wrong, restore society, and build the state anew. The latter plays, *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline*, show a beautiful, placid optimism which delights in reconciliations and reunions, and which plans for the triumph of external as well as internal good.

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

If Browning were less difficult to read, he would surely be the dominant poet in this country. I feel the ecstasy with which he exclaims, "Oh, good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth this autumn morning!" And how he sets my brain going when he says, because there is imperfection there must be perfection ; completeness must come of incompleteness ; failure is an evidence of triumph for the fulness of the days. Yes, discord is, that harmony may be ; pain destroys, that health may renew ; perhaps I am deaf and blind that others likewise afflicted may see and hear with a more perfect sense ! From Browning I learn that there is no lost good, and that makes it easier for me to go at life, right or wrong, do the best I know, and fear not. My heart responds proudly to his exhortation to pay gladly life's debt of pain,

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

— darkness, and cold. Lift up your burden, it is God's gift, bear it nobly.

The man of letters whose voice is to prevail must be an optimist, and his voice often learns its message from his life. Stevenson's life has become a tradition only ten years after his death ; he has taken his place among the heroes, the bravest man of letters since Johnson and Lamb. I remember an hour when I was discouraged and ready to falter. For days I had been pegging away at a task which refused to get itself accomplished. In the midst of my perplexity I read an essay of Stevenson which made me feel as if I had been "outing" in the sunshine, instead of losing heart over a difficult task. I tried again with new courage and succeeded almost before I knew it. I have failed many times since ; but I have never felt so disheartened as I did before that sturdy

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

preacher gave me my lesson in the
“fashion of the smiling face.”

Read Schopenhauer and Omar, and you will grow to find the world as hollow as they find it. Read Green’s “History of England,” and the world is peopled with heroes. I never knew why Green’s history thrilled me with the vigour of romance until I read his biography. Then I learned how his quick imagination transfigured the hard, bare facts of life into new and living dreams. When he and his wife were too poor to have a fire, he would sit before the unlit hearth and pretend that it was ablaze. “Drill your thoughts,” he said; “shut out the gloomy and call in the bright. There is more wisdom in shutting one’s eyes than your copybook philosophers will allow.”

Every optimist moves along with progress and hastens it, while every

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

pessimist would keep the world at a standstill. The consequence of pessimism in the life of a nation is the same as in the life of the individual. Pessimism kills the instinct that urges men to struggle against poverty, ignorance, and crime, and dries up all the fountains of joy in the world. In imagination I leave the country which lifts up the manhood of the poor and I visit India, the underworld of fatalism — where three hundred million human beings scarcely men, submerged in ignorance and misery, precipitate themselves still deeper into the pit. Why are they thus? Because they have for thousands of years been the victims of their philosophy, which teaches them that men are as grass, and the grass fadeth, and there is no more greenness upon the earth. They sit in the shadow and let the circumstances they should master grip them,

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

until they cease to be Men, and are made to dance and salaam like puppets in a play. After a little hour death comes and hurries them off to the grave, and other puppets with other "paste-board passions and desires" take their place, and the show goes on for centuries.

Go to India and see what sort of civilisation is developed when a nation lacks faith in progress and bows to the gods of darkness. Under the influence of Brahmanism genius and ambition have been suppressed. There is no one to befriend the poor or to protect the fatherless and the widow. The sick lie unattended. The blind know not how to see, nor the deaf to hear, and they are left by the roadside to die. In India it is a sin to teach the blind and the deaf because their affliction is regarded as a punishment for offences in a previous state of

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

existence. If I had been born in the midst of these fatalistic doctrines, I should still be in darkness, my life a desert-land where no caravan of thought might pass between my spirit and the world beyond.

The Hindoos believe in endurance, but not in resistance ; therefore they have been subdued by strangers. Their history is a repetition of that of Babylon. A nation from afar came with speed swiftly, and none stumbled, or slept, or slumbered, but they brought desolation upon the land, and took the stay and the staff from the people, the whole stay of bread, and the whole stay of water, the mighty man and the man of war, the judge, and the prophet and the prudent and the ancient, and none delivered them. Woe, indeed, is the heritage of those who walk sad-thoughted and downcast through this radiant, soul-delighting

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

earth, blind to its beauty and deaf to its music, and of those who call evil good, and good evil, and put darkness for light, and light for darkness.

What care the weather-bronzed sons of the West, feeding the world from the plain of Dakota, for the Omars and the Brahmins ? They would say to the Hindoos, “ Blot out your philosophy, dead for a thousand years ; look with fresh eyes at Reality and Life : put away your Brahma and your crooked gods, and seek diligently for Vishnu the Preserver.”

Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement ; nothing can be done without hope. When our forefathers laid the foundation of the American commonwealth, what nerved them to their task but a vision of a free community ? Against the cold, inhospitable sky, across the wilderness white with snow, where lurked the hidden

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

savage, gleamed the bow of promise—the faith that levels mountains, fills up valleys, bridges rivers, and carries civilisation to the uttermost parts of the earth. Although the pioneers could not build according to the Hebraic ideal they saw, yet they gave the pattern of all that is most enduring in our country to-day. They brought to the wilderness the thinking mind, the printed book, the deep-rooted desire for self-government, and the English common law that judges alike the king and the subject, the law on which rests the whole structure of our society. And it is significant that the foundation of that law is optimistic. In Latin countries the court proceeds with a pessimistic bias. The prisoner is held guilty until he is proved innocent. In England and the United States there is an optimistic presumption that the

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

accused is innocent until it is no longer possible to deny his guilt. Under our system, it is said, many criminals are acquitted; but it is surely better so than that many innocent persons should suffer. The pessimist cries, "There is no enduring good in man! The tendency of all things is through perpetual loss to chaos in the end. If there was ever an idea of good in things evil, it was impotent, and the world rushes on to ruin." But behold, the law of the two most sober-minded, practical, and law-abiding nations on earth assumes the good in man and demands a proof of the bad.

Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. The prophets of the world have been of good heart, or their standards would have stood naked in the field without a defender. Tolstoi's strictures lose power because

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

they are pessimistic. If he had seen clearly the faults of America, and still believed in her capacity to overcome them, our people might have felt the stimulation of his censure. But the world turns its back on a hopeless prophet and listens to Emerson, who takes into account the best qualities of the nation and attacks only the vices which no one can defend or deny. It listens to the strong man, Lincoln, who, in times of doubt, trouble, and need does not falter. He sees success afar, and by strenuous hope, by hoping against hope, inspires a nation. Through the night of despair he says, "All is well," and thousands rest in his confidence. When such a man censures, and points to a fault, the nation obeys, and his words sink into the ears of men ; but to the lamentations of the habitual Jeremiah the ear grows dull.

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

Our newspapers should remember this. The Press is the pulpit of the modern world and on the preachers who fill it much depends. If the protest of the Press against unrighteous measures is to avail, then for ninety-nine days the word of the preach should be buoyant and of good cheer, so that on the hundredth day the voice of the censure may be a hundred times strong. This was Lincoln's way. He knew the people; he believed in them and rested his faith on the justice and wisdom of the great majority. When in his rough and ready way he said, "You can't fool all the people all the time," he expressed a great principle, the doctrine of faith in human nature.

The prophet is not without honour, save he be a pessimist. The ecstatic prophecies of Isaiah did far more to restore the exiles of Israel to their

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

homes than the lamentations of Jeremiah did to deliver them from the hands of evil-doers. Even on Christmas Day do men remember that Christ came as a prophet of good? His joyous optimism is like water to feverish lips, and has for its highest expression the eight beatitudes. It is because Christ is an optimist that for ages he has dominated the western world. For nineteen centuries Christendom has gazed into His shining face and felt that all things work together for good. St. Paul, too, taught the faith which looks beyond the hardest things into the infinite horizon of Heaven, where all limitations are lost in the light of perfect understanding. If you are born blind, search the treasures of darkness. They are more precious than the gold of Ophir. They are love and goodness and truth and hope,

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

and their price is above rubies and sapphires.

Jesus utters and Paul proclaims a message of peace and a message of reason, a belief in the Idea, not in things, in love, not in conquest. The optimist is he who sees that men's actions are directed not by squadrons and armies, but by moral power, that the conquests of Alexander and Napoleon are less abiding than Newton's and Galileo's and St. Augustine's silent mastery of the world. Ideas are mightier than fire and sword. Noiselessly they propagate themselves from land to land, and mankind goes out and reaps the rich harvest and thanks God; but the achievements of the warrior are like his canvas-city, "to-day a camp, to-morrow all struck and vanished, a few pit-holes and heaps of straw." This was the Gospel of Jesus two thousand years

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

ago. Christmas Day is the festival of optimism.

Although there are still great evils which have not been subdued, and the optimist is not blind to them, yet he is full of hope. Despondency has no place in his creed, for he believes in the imperishable righteousness of God and the dignity of man. History records man's triumphant ascent. Each halt in his progress has been but a pause before a mighty leap forward. The time is not out of joint. If, indeed, some of the temples we worshipped in have fallen, we have built new ones on the sacred sites loftier and holier than those which have crumbled. If we have lost some of the heroic physical qualities of our ancestors, we have replaced them with a spiritual nobleness that turns aside wrath and binds up the wounds of the van-

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

quished. All the past attainments of man are ours, and more, his day-dreams have become our clear realities. Therein lies our hope and sure faith.

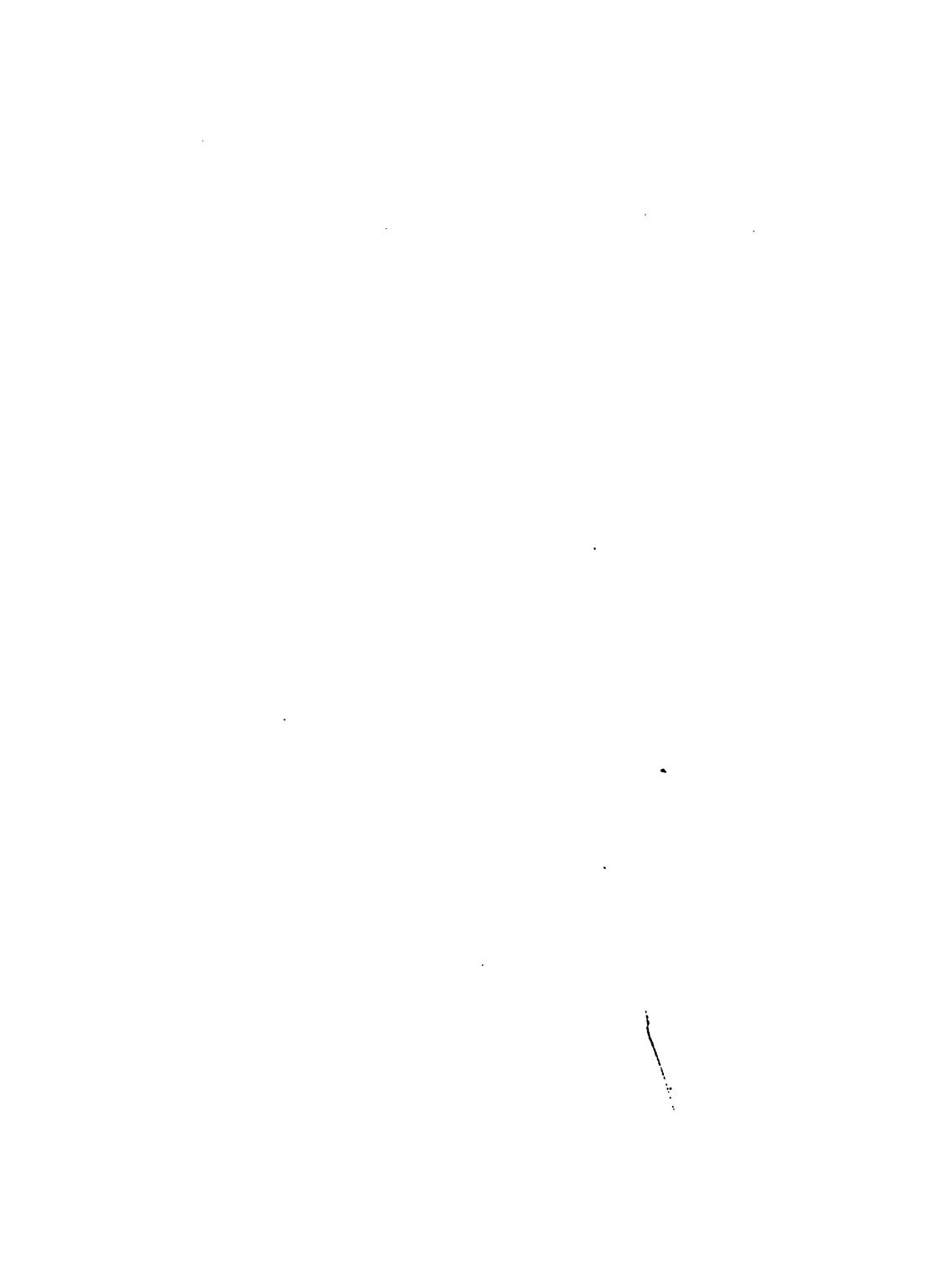
As I stand in the sunshine of a sincere and earnest optimism, my imagination "paints yet more glorious triumphs on the cloud-curtain of the future." Out of the fierce struggle and turmoil of contending systems and powers I see a brighter spiritual era slowly emerge—an era in which there shall be no England, no France, no Germany, no America, no this people or that, but one family, the human race; one law, peace; one need, harmony; one means, labour; one taskmaster, God.

If I should try to say anew the creed of the optimist, I should say something like this: "I believe in God, I believe in man, I believe in the

THE PRACTICE OF OPTIMISM

power of the spirit. I believe it is a sacred duty to encourage ourselves and others; to hold the tongue from any unhappy word against God's world, because no man has any right to complain of a universe which God made good, and which thousands of men have striven to keep good. I believe we should so act that we may draw nearer and more near the age when no man shall live at his ease while another suffers." These are the articles of my faith, and there is yet another on which all depends —to bear this faith above every tempest which overflows it, and to make it a principle in disaster and through affliction. Optimism is the harmony between man's spirit and the spirit of God pronouncing His works good.

Printed by BALLANTYNE, HANSON & Co.
London & Edinburgh



CECIL H. GREEN LIBRARY
STANFORD UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305-6004
(650) 723-1493
grncirc@sulmail.stanford.edu
All books are subject to recall.

DATE DUE

SEP 20 2001
SEP 20 2001
APR 14 2005
JUN 30 2005
APR 03 2006
JAN 22 2006

3
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31

IES

STANFORD, CALIFORNIA
BJ 1477 .K45 C.1
My key of life :
Stanford University Libraries

0 0100 00

